

Exercises for Tutorial 30. Topic Sentences and Unity

Principle I: Create topic sentences that make the main point of each of your paragraphs.

Exercise 1

Instructions: Recall that the most general point in a body paragraph is the topic sentence while the supporting details are more specific. This exercise will give you some practice in noticing the difference between general and specific statements. For each numbered item, select the sentence that you believe is *the most general statement*. *Select the checkbox for one of the sentences.*

1.

- ☐ A. For example, in 1986, San Francisco 49ers quarterback Joe Montana suffered a back injury that was so severe that doctors suggested he retire.
- ☐ B. Many pro football players are sidelined due to injuries each year, and some experience problems long after they stop playing.
- ☐ C. American football is an aggressive contact sport.
- ☐ D. Montana also missed the entire 1991 season after getting hit by defensive linebacker Leonard Marshall in a 1990 game.
- ☐ E. Though fatalities are rare, injuries sustained by players are often severe.
- ☐ F. While Montana is apparently healthy since retirement, other players are not so lucky.

2.

- ☐ A. Ballet movements such as the turnout of the hips and rising on the toes are beyond the natural range of human movement and place stress on the body when not performed correctly.
- ☐ B. Ballet is an extremely difficult form of dance that may lead to serious injuries.
- ☐ C. Eighty percent of professional ballet dancers will be injured in some way during their careers; 50 percent of dancers from large companies and 40 percent from small companies will miss performances due to injury.
- ☐ D. Though many people don't think of dancing as dangerous, professional and amateur dancers get hurt every year.
- ☐ E. The ballet practice of bending one's knees deeply after landing each jump may seem simple, but failing to do so may result in shin splints or knee injuries, all of which occur among professionals dancers.
- ☐ F. Amateur dancers who attempt professional moves without proper training are also likely to be injured.
- ☐ G. My friend Sally was severely injured while attempting to pole dance on an electric fence, but this type of injury is probably rare.

3.

- ☐ A. One activity that rarely leads to injury is watching TV.
- ☐ B. Although I once bruised my thumb when pounding the remote control too aggressively, I don't think this kind of injury is very common or very serious.
- ☐ C. When you play cards in the safety of your living room, you do risk getting a paper cut.
- ☐ D. The best way to avoid playing-card paper cuts is to sand the cards so that the edges are smooth.
- ☐ E. Given how dangerous the world is, you are probably most safe if you just stay home.
- ☐ F. You may also risk dropping a soda can or beer bottle on your toes, and due to this risk it is probably wise to wear solid-top shoes at home.
- ☐ G. Reading books might be dangerous, because some books teach dangerous things or might make you want to go out of the house and be around other people.
- ☐ H. Stick to TV shows that portray characters doing safe things, like singing on American Idol, so that you will not be tempted to engage in risky behavior.

Exercise 2

Instructions: This exercise should help you to see the importance of using topic sentences to make your main point. Read the following two paragraphs and answer the question that follow. *Type or write in the answer boxes.*

Paragraph A

Overpopulation was a major worry for many people during the late 1960's and throughout the 1970's. During that time, Paul Ehrlich wrote *The Population Bomb*, a book that described how people were reproducing at rates that could not be sustained—if population growth continued on such a scale, Ehrlich claimed that we would see an epidemic of starvation. In spite of this depressing premise, the book was a major bestseller and Ehrlich was invited on entertainment programs such as *The Tonight Show* to discuss his work. Partially as a result of Ehrlich's popularity, thousands of people in the U.S. and other countries advocated for increased birth control and awareness of the problem.

What is the main point of this paragraph?

Paragraph B

Games have taught young people different life skills in a fun way. In the past, games such as *Risk*, *Monopoly*, and *Life* gave families a way to spend time and have fun together, but they also taught young people about the challenges of living in the real world. *Monopoly*, by far the most popular, required players to pretend to do things that may not seem like fun—like going to the bank—but in the context of competing against friends or other family members, children were not likely to think of these things as anything but fun. The even more popular video games of today also sometimes teach about difficult subjects. In role-playing video games, players learn to plot strategies and make complex plans.

What is the main point of this paragraph?

Exercise 3

Instructions: Another way to understand and learn about how to use topic sentences is to look at a paragraph that lacks a topic sentence and create one for it. Above each of the following paragraphs, create an accurate topic sentence that states the main point. *Type or write in the answer boxes.*

1. Topic sentence:

During the first week of class, many students are nervous about their new teachers' expectations. It does not help that students may get lost on a big, unfamiliar campus and struggle to find their classes. Students may also worry about making new friends during the first week of college, especially if they have moved far away from home to go to school in a new environment. As if all this is not enough, students have to deal with challenges like parking their cars far away from campus on the first day, moving into dorms with new roommates shortly before classes start, and even trying to add classes when many are full. All in all, students do survive the first week of college, but it is not always a fun experience.

2. Topic sentence:

In his carefully researched book about SUVs, *Taken for a Ride*, author Keith Bradsher cites market research gathered by advertising agencies that supports this claim. SUV owners are typically "insecure and vain. They are frequently nervous about their marriages and uncomfortable about parenthood. They often lack confidence in their driving skills. Above all, they are apt to be self-centered and self-absorbed, with little interest in their neighbors and communities; they seldom go to church and have limited interest in doing volunteer work to help others." As one reviewer of Bradshaw's book put it, "Unlike any other vehicle before it, the SUV is the car of choice for the nation's most self-centered people."

3. Topic sentence:

The lyrics of most popular songs from the 1920s, '30s and '40s are about love and are clear and easy to understand. Think of Cole Porter's lines "Every time we say goodbye, I die a little. Every time we say goodbye, I wonder why a little." By the late 1960s, songwriters seemed to decide that making sense was no longer a priority. Consider Bob Dylan's immortal lines "Your dancing child with the Chinese suit. He spoke to me, and I took his flute. Now, I wasn't very cute to him, was I?" Can anyone figure out what exactly Bob is talking about here? Could Bob figure it out? Better yet, popular singer Michael Stipe sang these lines in the early 1990s: "Swan, swan, hummingbird what noisy cats are we. Long, low time ago, girl and dog he bore his cross." Excuse me? And today, some songwriters just run words together. Consider the Black Eyed Peas' "Lady Lumps," a song described by one reviewer as "so awful it hurts the mind." "I mix your milk with my cocoa puff, Milky, milky

cocoa, Mix your milk with my cocoa puff.” Can we just forget about words and go back to grunting? Until then, I’ll stick with my grandma’s record collection.

4. Topic sentence:

Among the most noteworthy of the new celebrities is Paris Hilton, who is famous for doing absolutely nothing that any respectable parent would want his or her daughter doing. She can’t really sing, nor can she dance, nor can she do much of anything, but she’s famous! She also has a friend, Nicole Richie, who is almost as famous and has also done next to nothing that anyone considers admirable. There are also celebrities who once accomplished things that required some actual talent, but who no longer do much more than provide material for trashy gossip magazines. Britney Spears is the queen of this group, but Lindsay Lohan sometimes competes with her for status as fodder for gossip. These celebrities may one day regain their status as actual talents, but for now, they are famous mainly for their apparent lack of intelligence.

5. Topic sentence:

While the health effects of short-term marijuana use seem to be minor, there are serious consequences to long-term heavy use, according to many studies. In July 2007, British medical journal The Lancet published a study that indicates that cannabis users have, on average, a 41% greater risk of developing psychosis than non-users. However, these cases mostly occurred in users with family histories of mental illness. Most of the non-medical public seems to agree that the main side effect of marijuana use is a tolerance, even preference, for long, sloppy guitar solos and incoherent “freestyle” raps. Frequent marijuana use also seems to encourage young men to make bad fashion choices, though most young men seem to do this regardless of their drug histories

6. Topic sentence:

A Pew Research Center poll of 109 leading historians found that 61 percent of them rank George W. Bush as “worst ever” among U.S. presidents. Bush’s key competition comes from 15th president James Buchanan, but a further 2 percent of the sample puts Bush right behind Buchanan as runner-up for “worst ever.” A total of 96 percent of the respondents place the Bush presidency in the bottom tier of American presidencies. And was his presidency a success or failure? On that score the numbers are still more resounding: 98 percent label it a “failure.”

Adapted from Scott Horton at Harpers.com.

7. Topic sentence:

Specifically, some studies found that listening to music could improve performance on certain intelligence tests given immediately after the listening session. Because of these results, the U.S. Congress was passing resolutions, and the governor of Georgia appropriated funds to buy a Mozart CD for every newborn baby in Georgia. Most scientists like myself found themselves in an uncomfortable position. Although we do believe that music can enhance thinking, and although we would all like to see more government funding for music programs, the actual study that claimed Mozart made you smarter contained many serious flaws. The experiment showed that listening to music made a slight difference but only when compared to doing nothing. When compared to any other form of mental stimulation like hearing a book on tape or reading, there was no advantage for music listening.

Adapted from *This is Your Brain on Music: The Science of a Human Obsession* by Daniel J. Levitin

8. Topic sentence:

Many students find themselves having to take “remedial” or developmental classes in English and Math when enrolled in college. The ratio of students enrolled in these classes may be as high as 70-80 percent at some colleges. Even students who are not enrolled in these classes often complain that high school has not prepared them well for college work. First-year students in college writing classes, for example, learn that the essay formats they were taught to follow in high school are not often used in college, while students in science classes find that they are expected to do more hands-on work in experiments. And many students discover that the college workload can be unpredictable, but that some classes require far more studying, reading, and writing than they are used to. This lack of preparation may explain the high rate of college dropouts.

9. Topic sentence:

While the public is well aware that some professional athletes take steroids and other performance enhancing substances, why don't we ask what keeps those cheerleaders so perky? I know that the police would at least stop and talk to me if I walked around smiling like that, for that long, or jumping up and down as cheerleaders do. Think also about the mascots of most sports teams. Surely someone besides me has noticed that Brutus the Buckeye, Ohio State's beloved mascot, has big, red eyes. I don't think they got that way naturally. And what about the fans? I suspect the guys wearing nothing but letters on their bare chests are staying warm with something other than herbal tea. The only solution is to start drug testing of everyone who gets near any sports stadium.

10. Topic sentence:

Millions of children looked up to Barney, the Dinosaur, for support and love and as a model for “how to be a friend.” No doubt this is why the line around the cemetery was so long. Thousands of people wept as they sang “I Love You, You Love Me” over the gravesite. Although some found him irritating, it is indeed tragic that the nation has lost Barney. If only he hadn’t used his cell phone while driving, Barney, the Dinosaur, would still be with us.

Principle II: Stay focused in paragraphs by sticking to the main point, as stated in the topic sentence.

Exercise 4

Instructions: Identify anywhere in the following paragraphs where the writer goes “off topic” by making a statement that does not fit with the topic sentence. *Type, write, or copy-paste that sentence into the answer boxes.*

1. Whitman’s book *Leaves of Grass* gave rise to the expression “banned in Boston,” but it was not banned there for long. By 1883, both the Boston and the Cambridge public libraries had placed the book on the open shelves. The movie *Boogie Nights* was also controversial. Because it was now available to many readers, *Leaves of Grass* found a new audience including anarchist Emma Goldman. For Goldman, Whitman was one of the three American writers—the others being Emerson and Thoreau—who bridged the gap between her Russian-bred radicalism and the anarchist side of the American tradition.

Adapted from *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism* by Susan Jacoby

Off-topic sentence:

2. Augustine can be called the founder of the Western spirit. We can call him this because no other theologian, aside from St. Paul, has been more influential in the West. We know him more intimately than any other thinker of antiquity, largely because of his *Confessions*, the eloquent and passionate book about his discovery of God. Another important thinker is Plato. In this book, Augustine describes how he came to see God as essential to humanity.

Adapted from *A History of God: The 4,000 Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* by Karen Armstrong

Off-topic sentence:

3. In their 1997 book, *Talking About Leaving: Why Undergraduates Leave the Sciences*, Seymour and Hewitt present the results of a three-year study of more than 450 science and engineering students. English is not as demanding a major as science. The researchers gathered the data on the students using interviews and focus groups, which were divided equally between men and women. Some of these men and women chose to stay in science and engineering, but many, particularly women, chose to transfer to other fields.

Adapted from *Who's Afraid of Marie Curie? The Challenges Facing Women in Science and Technology* by Linely Erin Hall

Off-topic sentence:

4. Some people believe that we live in the worst of times, that the horrors we in the 20th century have endured—or at least have heard and read about—are the worst in human history. But is it really true that the two world wars, the terror famines, the Gulag, and the extermination camps of the 20th century were worse than all other horrors in history? The United States is currently considering legislation to address the serious problems with global warming. Should we not remember that the Thirty Years War of the 17th century resulted in the death of a third of the population of Germany? During this war alone, fields were abandoned, corpses rotted by the roadside, villages were destroyed, and entire towns were put to death.

Adapted from *Our Culture, What's Left of It* by Theodore Dalrymple

Off-topic sentence:

5. For the poor in many countries, dogs were the best transport animals they could have. Dogs were easy to obtain, small enough to keep in a family's living quarters, and could survive on whatever scraps of food might be available. On the other hand, cats are smelly, in part because they miss the litter box. In addition to being inexpensive to keep, dogs were good guards, good at hauling goods, and good companions.

Adapted from *The Intelligence of Dogs* by Stanley Coren

Off-topic sentence:

Exercise 5

Instructions: To summarize this tutorial, answer the following questions. *Type or write in the answer boxes.*

1. What is the main point of an essay?

2. In relation to the thesis statement of an essay, what should topic sentences of body paragraphs do?

3. In relation to the rest of the sentences in a body paragraph, what does the topic sentence do?

4. When should you start a new paragraph in an essay?

5. How do you stay focused in body paragraphs?